

CLASSICAL CONNECTION

by Steven Libowitz

A BALANCING ACT

If new Santa Barbara Symphony music director Nir Kabaretti can sustain and build on the vibrancy and musicality of the audition performance that earned him the position, the community is in for a rich and thrilling ride.

As it is, in person he's so charming it's disarming.

Kabaretti was quick with both light-hearted and serious responses as well as personal stories, laughter and wit in our hour-long conversation on the patio of the Montecito guesthouse the conductor and his wife, Gaia, are staying in for this first concert courtesy of a symphony patron.

Kabaretti, who studied music in his native Israel before receiving a conducting degree in Vienna, where he stayed for 10 years before positions in Italy and Spain, has an impressive resumé in both symphonic and operatic repertoire. Add in the fact that he speaks five languages fluently, it's a curriculum vitae so weighty it's hard to believe he's so personable. Yet we chatted quite informally in the morning before Kabaretti, who'd arrived in town only the day before, headed downtown for the first round of auditions for several musician openings in the Symphony. Here are the highlights.

Q. Why did you want this job?

A. I've been established in Europe and played in first-class theatres, working with top orchestras, but I've never really played in America. And when I worked with American singers and soloists they all told me I should come here. When I saw the opening posted, I thought this was my chance.... It was a very long process, nearly two years from when I first applied. I didn't think I would win, but I figured it would be a nice concert and I'd get to



As the Santa Barbara Symphony approaches the beginning of its new season on October 15, music director Nir Kabaretti says his plan will be to strike "a balance between what the orchestra needs, what the audience likes to hear and needs to hear, and what I'm good at and not so good at"

see California, where I'd never been before.

Why beyond the concert itself do you think you were chosen?

If all the candidates were on the same musical level, I think it's my experience at being open to understanding what's needed. It's important to have someone the musicians find easy to work with, and can communicate with. Also, I'm somebody who can solve problems, because being music director is not just making music. You have to deal with personalities, you have to use some psychology, understand their needs, when to demand and when to leave them be. It's a very fragile game. For me, the concert went very smoothly, which surprised me, and I'm sure that helped.

Your predecessor, Gisele Ben-Dor, was very popular. Do you feel added pressure knowing you are following her?

No, because we are so different. I come from the European tradition, which I think is very different from Gisele, who was an American product. And she was an expert in Latin music, which is not one of my specialties. I appreciate very much what she did for the symphony, but I have to build something on the base I have, and there are wonderful things already here. I will take it into a more European tradition.

What does that mean, exactly?

It's a concept of sound and style. I studied in Germany and Austria, and that's where the composers lived, where they studied, and the language they spoke – Brahms, Schubert, Beethoven, Mahler – I know this language. And living in Italy gave me that reference

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– Nir Kabaretti,

Santa Barbara Symphony music director

too. It can be very technical, how you use the bow, or how you play the short notes. It's also a matter of tempo and volume. I have a vision in my head that's a different style than most American musicians.

The orchestra members come from different schools and academies, different cultures and countries, so you have to make it more homogeneous, unite them stylistically. Everybody has their own ideas, and I of course have mine.

Such as...

The main job of the conductor is to create that style. I don't have any specific goals, yet. I have to learn more to see what the community and the musicians need, and where we are now, then try to find a balance with what I want to do. The feedback from the concerts will be the engine that drives the future. But I do know we have to be more original, to innovate. You can't stay in the old tradition of what was good one hundred years ago and be limited by that.

My strengths are in the classic-Romantic period. But American composers are also a big thing for me. I think we should be a stage for young artists, local composers. That's our identity. When an Italian orchestra tours in Japan they play mainly Italian operas. A German orchestra will play Wagner and Beethoven. Similarly, an American orchestra should play Bernstein and Copland. I think we will strive to do more of that, and not only on Fourth of July.

This is a part-time orchestra, only performing six or seven programs a year, two concerts each, and with many members not even living here. How do you develop cohesiveness?

To tell you the truth, I've never been in a system like that. The orchestras I've worked with usually worked at least twenty times a month. So I had to study the situation. My initial ideas are to bring them so much work that we can work constantly together, not just five sessions total a month, including rehearsals, which is far less than needed to keep an ensemble together. That's definitely the most difficult challenge, but it's necessary. You have to have a feeling of togetherness, this feeling when the concertmaster exchanges looks with the flutist and they know they are (in synch), which you cannot create out of thin air. It's simply a matter of playing together.

My biggest interest is to increase the capacity of the orchestra to make more music, to go to other places to play. Make it very attractive not only for Santa Barbara but to take the orchestra on the road. We have a lot of ideas. I can't get into specifics because we are working on it right now. I think it's necessary to make the orchestra more flexible. Maybe it's smaller groups, chamber music, more festivals – next year will be a percussion festival – and other ideas, including touring. We have a good model, but we need to improve it.

What can you tell me about your ideas for programming?

You have to find a balance between what the orchestra needs, what the audience likes to hear and needs to hear, and what I'm good at and not so good at. I admire Baroque music, for example, but it's not my forte. I would not program three Baroque pieces because three rehearsals would not be enough. Also I'm not very good at some of modern music, from the extra complicated mathematical schools. It's not something that communicates to me, and it's hard for the audience to follow. Who wants to come to a concert after a hard day of work and hear something he can't understand? I'm not saying we will only play light pieces – many great works are strong and tragic. But I've conducted some world premieres that to tell you the truth I really didn't understand. I don't want to do that here.

I want to make the concerts an event that you will not forget tomorrow. It's happened to me: sometimes I run into a colleague and it's embarrassing because I can't remember what they played and then there are other concerts that have stayed with me thirty years later. That is my goal for Santa Barbara.

(The Santa Barbara Symphony kicks off the 2006-07 season with concerts on Saturday, October 14 at 8 pm and Sunday, October 15, at 3 pm, at the Arlington Theatre. Jennifer Frautschi is the soloist for Brahms's Concerto for Violin in D Major on a program that also features Wagner's "Die Meistersinger" Overture and "Ride of the Valkyries" and Prokofiev's "Romeo and Juliet." Call 963-4408 for tickets, or the symphony at 898-9626 for subscription information, or visit www.thesymphony.org.)

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